

Jesus the Stranger

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 19 May, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Andrew Irvine

Easter 5C

Ezekiel 34:11-24; Matthew 25:31-46

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqC6ZPnPdtI>

Dare we understand you, Child of God?
Dare we walk in your way?
Surely you know our griefs too well.
You know our pain.
Dare we share in your suffering, Child of God?

Dare we understand you, Child of God?
Dare we look upon you?
Surely we see our ugliness,
Our sin in you.
Dare we look to you, O Child of God?

Dare we understand you, Child of God?
Dare we die with you?
Surely you know death's bitterness,
Its scars on you.
Dare we take our cross and follow you?

I wrote these words more than 25 years ago now. It was an attempt to more clearly perceive what I sensed as the strangeness of that child of God, Jesus. As I look back at that now distant time, the 'me' who wrote those words seems a little strange, too. He was a student at Sydney University, getting ready to graduate with a B.A. in English. He had been a leading member of Sydney University's Evangelical Union, the "EU". But he had stepped back from any formal role with EU in his honours year. He wanted to be able to spend that year thinking through some of the new critical theories and ideas he was being exposed to at Uni – and he suspected that Evangelical Union might not be the most supportive environment for doing so.

Well he (I) was right about that, and my step back turned out to be a push away. (The balance between how much I was pushing and how much I was being pushed still is a little unclear to me.) But I had never been a snug fit with the EU in any case. My Uniting Church roots meant that certain things, like a Christian concern for social justice, which seemed common sense to me, didn't seem so from the perspective of EU's emphasis on individual salvation out of the world, and a fairly unimaginative moralism so long as we were in the world.

So this song was also my attempt to try to awaken a sense of how strange it is that middle class people like me and my friends were claiming, or even would want to claim, to be disciples of Jesus Christ. For, considering what I understood discipleship to entail in a world that was suffering fearfully because of social and economic inequity (from which I knew I benefited), I wanted to give voice to this uneasy conscience which could question whether we understood what we said we were committed to, and whether we understood whom we said we placed our trust in.

The song expressed my unease with the “cheap grace” of an evangelical middle-classism that lauded Jesus as saviour while evading the costs of following him. We thought it was better to be “nice” and “comfortable” (deep down, I think that’s what we thought) and keep our distance from those who couldn’t be, and that was better than knowing our griefs, our pain – let alone those of the crucified one.

But the ‘me’ who wrote this was a little naïve compared to the fellow in his fifties before you this morning. It turns out, for one thing, that the struggle between my desire to rise heroically to the call of costly grace and my complacent wish to settle a comfortable bargain – this struggle persists, unfortunately, unresolved throughout the story of my life. But the naiveté is not about just my little story. In retrospect, I see I was naive too, about the bigger canvas of history and the place of Christian faith in it. Wandering into graduate studies in philosophy, religion and theology in the 1990s helped with that. I left Australia for the USA in 1992 as a *With Love to the World* scholar, bound for Boston University School of Theology where I spent nearly 9 often difficult years, but my time and teachers at BU are one of the luckier gifts in my life. I learned there that those earlier pricking’s of my conscience, however naïve they were, were not misleading.

But I also learned that even the very strange Jesus I thought I knew was not nearly strange enough. This is what I mean: Jesus, the apocalyptic preacher from Nazareth who earnestly – if mistakenly - believed that a God in the heavens would soon separate the sheep from the goats, drive out and destroy all evil from the earth, and establish a righteous nation; this Jesus is even stranger to us than I thought in my EU days. His world and my world are, in many ways, worlds apart. For instance, he lived in a world where, when he looked up, he saw the armies of God (or Gods) at night, manoeuvring about the sky. I think they’re stars and constellations. He lived in a world in which he fought demons who took possession of vulnerable people to do them harm. I suspect he had a wonderful talent for helping people with psycho- and socio-somatic illnesses.¹

I don’t mean to suggest that he was wrong to engage the world the ways he did, for it seems that when he did, it was liberating and life-changing for many people. But I do mean, I can’t engage the world in just that way he did. Jesus, I suppose, had always believed in miracles, but I find that pretty hard. How very strange he still is to me, how very hard it is to imagine myself ever meeting Jesus on his terms. And, how estranged I feel, sometimes, from those who claim that they do!

And turn it around. How strange must we look to Jesus, if he were to show up? What would he, who expected history to end with his generation, make of our mere existence, two millennia later? And what would he make of the world we have made, a world that reaches out to the heavens, where we land space probes on wandering stars traveling at thousands of kilometres per hour, millions of kilometres away. What would he make of the world we have made that reaches into the densely folded proteins of our DNA, where we are learning to diagnose and treat formerly

¹ He preached endurance to the faithful who were oppressed and at the mercy of (not godless but) god-glutted infidels. I just don’t believe the world is in the dire state he probably did. At least, not in the same way. God is not going to step in to save us from destroying the ecosystem we depend on for life, I don’t believe. God is not going to save us from the awful cruelties with which we afflict one another, I don’t believe.

intractable and ominous disorders? Could he begin to understand who we are? Or would we just be strangers to one another - perhaps irremediably?

A little over a century ago, in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer already concluded something along these lines. Surveying the massive research of the nineteenth century, aiming to discover who Jesus of Nazareth had been, Schweitzer wrote: “*Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time . . .*” This conclusion has lost none of its bite.

He did say more, though. I have cut him off in mid-sentence. He went on to say: “*Although remains a stranger, **His spirit, which lies hidden in His words, is known in simplicity, and its influence is direct.***” (Schweitzer 399) Now this is not a Jesus of miraculous interventions, but a Jesus known through a mystical identity:

“*He comes to us as one unknown, said Schweitzer, “without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He comes to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn then, in their own experience, who He is.*” (Schweitzer 401)

Schweitzer’s moral is clear: the historical Jesus never called anybody to form a fan club. He called disciples to live as he aspired to live. Historically speaking, it seems Jesus was pretty uncompromising about this. If Matthew’s gospel is any reliable guide, Jesus could be forgiving, but he commanded nothing less than perfection and obedience to Torah. No alternatives. Anything less was hypocrisy.

I’ve already talked about my doubts, right? I’m still not sure Matthew is a reliable guide – historically speaking. For the story that Matthew tells is rigorously constructed to cope with the failure of those apocalyptic hopes for a divine intervention. Matthew’s Gospel seems deeply affected by the devastating failure of God to deliver a political miracle – (despite what some people might be saying today.)

Matthew expected God to send a saviour who would win the war against the Romans. As you likely know, that war was a complete disaster for the Jews and, in Matthew’s Gospel, that disappointment manifests itself in this single minded preoccupation with how to distinguish the truly faithful from false believers, whom God, unexpectedly, has not chosen to come and sort out for us. There are no political miracles. I think that’s Matthew’s Gospel in part – there are no political miracles! And we need to maintain that hope to sort through, faithful to a vision of a better and more wholesome world.

Exhibit A is the passages we heard earlier. Ezekiel proclaims that God will judge between the sheep. This is a prophecy directed against those who oppress and marginalize other members of the one flock. The one community. Strangely, Matthew concentrates entirely and exclusively on the image of separating the sheep from *goats*. Ezekiel mentions this, but his real focus is on sheep – on sheep mistreating other sheep. Matthew is the only one to do this in the New Testament gospels. I don’t – and can’t – know if Jesus was just as extreme as Mathew. Either way, I am hesitant to say: *we need to separate sheep from goats* - although, Ezekiel’s prophecy hits like fresh revelation, doesn’t it! Here’s what he says again: “*Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? Must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?*”

An analysis of the voting and policy preferences of middle-classist Christians, especially who think they are white, in both Australia and the US, have to make you wonder if Matthew's advice on identifying and denouncing false faith is not coming into its own again!

But I won't go on in this way because, for all his strangeness, real and imagined, when it comes to Jesus, I happen by accident of birth and upbringing to be one of those people for whom Jesus seems at the same time to be a source of a power that overcomes estrangement. Jesus is – except in secret – both God and my neighbour. While Matthew is promoting this stark and uncompromising division to separate out people, at the same time seeming to sort of work against this, he offers this mystical, merciful identification.

'When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And he answers them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

So, I don't wish to belong to a Jesus fan club. I hope to become a good enough disciple to live more the way Matthew suggests he lived, to know and love my neighbours as myself, however strange we are! I am a long way from doing this well. And, in part, I think that's because I do understand better something of where Jesus leads, and I have not overcome my own middle-classism not to be afraid.

Although I have heroes and heroines who have gone before us -for instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, right? In a 1943 essay he wrote to his friends and family, he asked, *"Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not their reason, their principles, their conscience, their freedom, or virtue; these can all be excuses to avoid following; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, they are called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God's question and call."*

Bonhoeffer knew, as well as anyone knows, that the question of God of which he speaks, is always, at bottom, *"Who do you say that I am?"* And for Christians, he put it this way: *Who is Jesus Christ for us today?* And this question is an inevitable call because, ultimately, how we answer it is identical to how we answer the question of who we are. A question we answer by how we live in relationship to others. And, since naming God means knowing ourselves, there are oh so many names of God and all of them imperfect, including the name I've been quick to recommend.

However strange Jesus seems, and however estranged I may feel from neighbours in my political community, encountering the mystery of God in Christ, even the name of stranger won't stick. I have to give it up. Jesus, insofar as he is God (of course in secret), will not be bound by the name of Stranger. Jesus, insofar as he is our neighbour (again, of course, in secret), is not strange at all. He is so familiar, so close at hand that perhaps the only reason we remain strangers is if we fearfully enforce our estrangement.

Dare we understand you, child of God?
Dare we take our cross and follow you?

Amen.